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## Caribbean Cultural Creolization

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### Abstract

This paper tackles the concept of creolization that lies at the very center of discussions of transculturalism, transnationalism, multiculturalism, diversity and hybridization. The concept focuses on the cultural syncretism, as the source for cross-fertilization between different cultures. When creolization takes place, the individuals select particular elements from incoming or inherited cultures, investing these with meanings, different from those they owned in the original culture and then merge these to create totally new varieties that replace the first forms. The creolized subject is thus a cultural element that stresses new common identity in the place of identification. A diasporic consciousness, by contrast, generally reflects a degree of anxiety with cultural identities in the current location. ‘Homeland’ is recovered through historical memory and social organization, the past providing a continuing pole of attraction and identification. In order to describe the cultural identity, the paper proposes an articulation of the related issues of doubling, hybridity and métissage. Starting from the premise that creolization means more than just mixture, we note that the cultural transmission under situations of displacement and de-territorialization suggests the recognition of powerful ‘others’. We couldn’t but notice that *creolization* is the force that brings human cultures into relation with one another, a process of relation that neither reduces the other to the same, nor resolves itself in a reified, unchanging form. I posit that, in order to understand the self as it functions in the Caribbean, it becomes important to analyze the way in which the process of creolization took place in the interaction between the Caribbean and Europe.

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## 1. Introduction

Starting from the premise that creolization means more than just mixture, I noted that the cultural transmission under situations of displacement and de-territorialization suggests the recognition of powerful ‘others’. We couldn’t but notice that *creolization* is the force that brings human cultures into relation with one another, a process of relation that neither reduces the other to the same, nor resolves itself in a reified, unchanging form. The self is important to Caribbean identity because due to a history of slavery, métissage, creolization and colonization, the question of “Who am I” acquires a more profound significance and becomes loaded within the cultural and racial themes, which are not to be found with the same intensity in the European setting. I posit that, in order to understand the self as it functions in the Caribbean, it becomes important to analyze the way in which the process of creolization took place in the interaction between the Caribbean and Europe. In analysing Rhys’s novels, it is quite clear that the ambivalence of cultural identity in Rhys’s novels is to be found in the cultural Creolization occurring among overlapping and conflicting Caribbean boundaries, histories and identities. The paper also approaches Paul Gilroy’s concept of ‘Black Atlantic’ as a reality of modernity and double-consciousness. While a term like ‘black’ or ‘white’ appears to stand on its own in delineating a particular content, that content is actually determined as much by what it negatively excludes as by what it positively designates. Such is the meaning of the dialectical dead-end Hegel’s master finds himself in his famous master-slave phenomenology and the real condition of dominance in the ‘Black Atlantic’.

In proposing an analytical discourse about the emergence of a new postcolonial identity, I also attempt to analyze the situation or conditions that determine the colonial Other to produce a new cultural encounter. Thus, Fanon offers us an acute sense of these processes of production when he writes, “the black soul is a white man’s artifact” (Fanon, 1967, p.13). In Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the Caribbean region finds itself unified around a certain persistent and irreducible Otherness within their boundaries and it is this core of strangeness within, this self-differences which qualitatively distinguishes the Caribbean from the conventional poetics of nation-making in Europe. The Caribbean constitutes the “definitive” community of others, a community in which one never precisely knows who one’s neighbour is. I also suggested that there are sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) because there are no longer real environments of memory (*milieux de mémoire*). This links place to its historical axis, spaces of identity to questions of collective memory and tradition. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Voyage in the Dark*, respectively, identity becomes a question of memory, and memories of home in particular. *Heimat/homeland*, in this sense, is not a mirage, but a dangerous illusion, centering on shared traditions and memories; it is a mythical bond rooted in a lost past, a result of the search for a rooted, bounded, whole and authentic identity.

In order to describe the cultural identity in the Caribbean region, the paper proposes an articulation of the related issues of doubling, hybridity and métissage within a framework that writes the difference of the region as both British and West Indian. Antonio Benitez-Rojo (1996) calls the Caribbean culture: “a supersyncretic culture characterized by its complexity, its individualism, and its instability, that is to say Creole culture, whose seeds had come scattered from the richest stores of three continents” (p. 87). It seems legitimate, therefore – in the light of the multivalences of the resulting admixtures that have become the primary markers of Caribbean cultural identity – to locate in the constant slippages of the Caribbean creole the primary framework embodying the elements of dynamism and displacement, multiplicity, indeterminacy that have become the region’s defining sign and whose relational space has sought to re-envision the cultural identity. In a sense, then, the interstitial complexities mapped by the British Caribbean territories are a correlative of the ultimate regional paradox; the identities produced by the process of creolization mediated by the traces of culture, but tied to the metropole in a political double bind that renders them neither completely British nor West Indian, but more than the sum of both. Indeed, this doubleness of the British Caribbean integrates and reproduces a cultural axis of Caribbeanness that articulates the interstitiality of the British Caribbean postcolonial condition and implicitly illustrating what Stuart Hall (1996) terms as: “the recognition of the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects” (p. 95). Thus, Barbados, Jamaica and Dominica are among the remnants of a British colonial empire. While their historical past and colonial present relate them to a distant metropole, their cultural identities place them within a Caribbean continuum.

## 2. Cultural Creolization

Creolization means more than just mixture; it involves the creation of new cultures. However, the cultural processes of creolization are not simply a matter of constant pressure from the center toward the periphery, but a much more creative interplay of creole elements. Magical mimesis on the colonial frontier points to a basic empowering effect to the imitation function—either through the production of similes by mimicry or by contiguity and contact (a ‘creole continuum’) – by which a copy partakes the power of the original. This was possible by means of a “rupture and revenge of signification” (Taussig, 1993, p.187). If cultural contact and transmission occurs in not-so-related contexts, then I can characterize creolization as a symbolic substitute, instead of the more neutral – and in my view, inaccurate – concepts of “borrowing” or “conversation” (Hannerz, 1992, p. 153) between cultures, depicted as forms of “Creole contagion” (Abrahams, 1992, p.123). Imitating the symbols and gestures of powerful others ‘with an attitude’ is probably the most proper characterization to these super-forces of creolization. As Hannerz maintains:

“Creolization also increasingly allows the periphery to talk back. As it creates a greater affinity between the cultures of the center and the periphery, and as the latter increasingly uses the same organizational forms and the same technology as the center [...] some of its new cultural commodities become increasingly attractive on a global market. Third World music of a creolized kind becomes world music [...] Creolization thought is open-ended; the tendencies towards maturation and saturation are understood as quite possibly going on side by side, or interleaving” (Hannerz, 1992, p.154).

According to Hannerz and other writers cited above, the process of creolization has offered a space to create a new sense of home, a place to express its within cultural imperialism.

Quoting Edouard Glissant (1981), “...in the Caribbean there are a multitude of relationships” (p. 84) mostly produced, shaped, either encouraged or prevented by the European colonizing powers. Although it has come to refer to different people in different islands at different times, generally the ‘creole’ has always been the most indicative product of Caribbean interculturalization and by far the figure that has most haunted its narrative imagery. If the inability to recognize the boundaries of this metaphorical space is the inability to maintain sanity by grounding experience in discrete concepts, then the breakages of Antoinette’s associative context leave her caught within the space of metaphor, where “this” can no longer be distinguished from “that”. The Sargasso is a sea that has no shores, and by calling it “wide,” Rhys speaks to the power of the liminal space to encompass a large portion of human experience and implies a failed attempt at post-liminal incorporation:

“[...] we are cross-stitching silk roses on a pale background. We can colour the roses as we choose and mine are green, blue and purple. Underneath I will write my name in fire red, Antoinette Mason, née Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica, 1839” (Rhys, 1969a, p. 29).

We can see it in one allusion he makes in the second part of the novel: “She’ll loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter (a mad girl. She’ll not care who she loves). She’ll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would – or could. Or could” (Rhys, 1969a, p. 106).

As the following quotation also shows, Rhys uses Rochester’s own comments to throw into confusion the opposition between sanity and madness: “I was exhausted. All the mad conflicting emotions had gone and left me wearied and empty. *Sane*” (Rhys, 1969a, p.111).

## 3. Imagining the Black-Atlantic: Trans-Racial Identity

The image of the ‘Black Atlantic’ is at once a metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence and by that same token a metonym, a sign of its absence and loss. It is precisely from this edge of meaning and being, from this shifting boundary of otherness within identity that we can ask: ‘What does a *black* man want?’ The black man wants the objectifying confrontation with *otherness*; in the *colonial psyche* there is an unconscious disavowal of the negating, splitting moment of desire.

In this section, I aim to explore the ambivalent, uncertain questions of colonial desire with a study case of Jean

Rhys's Caribbean writing. We can think of a correspondence between the *mise-en-scène* of unconscious fantasy and the phantoms of racist fear (the language of colonial racism) and hate that stalk the colonial scene. In writing *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy wanted to devise a theoretical approach to understanding race that encompassed three crucial elements: the idea of race as fluid rather than static; as a transnational and intercultural, rather than strictly national, phenomenon; the focus on analyzing resistance to racism as a phenomenon that emerged transnationally and diasporically. Gilroy seeks to provide a theoretical framework of race that bridges the hemispheres. To do this he takes the Atlantic as his preferred unit of analysis and uses it to ground his transnational perspective on race, with extent to transracial identity. In Gilroy's view the 'Black Atlantic' represents the history of the migratory movements of people of African descent from Africa to Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas. Through these transnational lenses it can be viewed how ideas about nationality and identity were formed. In the cultural criticism, the concept of the Black Atlantic focuses on travelling identities as well as on the process creolization (seen as a cultural artifact); thus, the Caribbean is a hybridized form of the cultural identity.

The author maps the Atlantic Ocean as a way to categorize a whole series of transoceanic exchanges in the past and in the present and in so doing seeks to move beyond racially essentialist ways of thinking which posit a pure and singular black (or African) culture. In supporting the hybrid nature of black culture and the deep connections between the formation of modernity and the formation of black culture, Gilroy points to the fact that modernity is itself a hybrid phenomenon. The idea of movement (travelling) is central to Gilroy's argument. Hence, the image of a ship forms a central metaphor in the text. Gilroy describes ships as microsocial systems that focus one's attention on the circulation of ideas as well as identifying them as cultural and political artifacts. Slave ships are particularly central to Gilroy's argument as he considers slavery as a fundamental moment for the emergence of modernity, modern ideas of race, and the *Black Atlantic* as, in his words, "a counterculture of modernity" (Gilroy, 1994, p. 67). It was the racism and modernity that led people of African descent to search for ways to construct oppositional identities and retain a sense of cultural integrity and forge common cultural memories.

As I referred to above, Gilroy denies ethnicity as a basis of identity, yet still alludes to a 'Black Atlantic' which needs some common inheritance. As a result, Gilroy evokes a 'travelling culture' in the African diaspora which is seen as liberating. According to Echehuero (1999), Gilroy 'acts' to restrain the essence of diaspora – the notion of exile. One thing we can learn from Echehuero in order to problematise the question of identity is that no matter how complex and mixed a diaspora is "you cannot belong" (p. 23). Whereas black people may have, as Gilroy (1994) sets forth, some space to manipulate this space is not limitless: "...the predicament for those who have a problem choosing where to belong is that they cannot quite get themselves to realize that their options in the matter are very limited indeed" (p. 70). Paul Gilroy does not have a choice of identities in this context of the "instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade" (p. 71). The main point here is to see that this enunciation is reinforced by racial and gender forces, so that individuals within diaspora are not free to determine their own identities. This fact points to the final element in the diasporic consciousness: the question of return. The individuals or groups have different relations to 'home' and return: some see Africa in idealistic terms, while others perceive home as a dynamic entity, so that it is without meaning to think of a genuine home to return to. The images we have here are multiple imaginings of home depending upon the cultural circumstances and the level of consciousness. For example, in talking about the relationship between Caribbean identity and the African home, Stuart Hall (1996) comments "The original 'Africa' is no longer there. It too has been transformed. History is, in that sense, irreversible". (p. 78) Such a personal interpretation of the diasporic issue led Kwame Appiah (1993) to argue that "whatever Africans share, we do not have a common traditional culture, common language, common religious or conceptual vocabulary" (p. 45). Brah also gathers in his idea of 'homing' the power of return and home, in which there is a lingering desire that may or may not be realised in reality. Echehuero (1999) approves this idea by saying that: "The power of the idea lies in the principle of it; that a return is possible forever, whenever, if ever" (p. 88). This 'gathering of exile' or 'prophetic vision' of the return from exile makes the diasporic identity different from other groups' identities.

Furthermore, in his article *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, Paul Gilroy focuses upon the linkage between a deterritorialized, diasporic black consciousness and the local and territorialized identity politics of whiteness, which produces a variety of 'hybrid' cultural practices and collective identities. He asserts that "Black Britain defines itself crucially as part of a diaspora. Taking into account the condition of the colonial world, we can see the

colonizer caught in the ambivalence of paranoid identification, a Manichean allegory of his colonial consciousness. In this case, the white man is projecting his fears and desires on 'them'. From this Manichean perspective, the native's violence is a force intended to bridge the gap between the white as subject and the non-white, the Black man as object. Moreover, this fact reflects his view of the psychic structure of the colonial relation: the opposition between the native and the settler zones, like the overlaying of black and white bodies. In a Hegelian sense, this flash of 'recognition' fails to acknowledge the colonial relation: "And yet the Negro knows there is a difference. He wants it [...] The former slave needs a challenge to his humanity" (Fanon, 1967, p. 145). In the absence of such a challenge, Fanon argues that the colonized can only imitate, never identify. Beyond the permeable boundaries of the colonial desire, the white masked black man lurks. Thus, it becomes possible to cross, even to shift those boundaries, for the strategy of the colonial desire is to stage the drama of identity at the point at which the black mask is trying to reveal the white skin. At the margins, the transformative forces in-between the black body and the white body changes the psychic of the racialized subjects. Thus, in the Caribbean colonial discourse the stereotype of the *mulata* evokes contradictory feelings: fear and desire.

In Rhys's fiction every text includes fragmented elements of Afrocentric identity that acknowledge the culture of the Black Atlantic. Thus, in her fiction Rhys transgresses these Black 'cultural aesthetical references' under the form of ancestral Black legacy such as: Caribbean voodoo, obeah folk magic, religious practices from the West African culture that 'crossed' the Atlantic, towards her Dominican homeland. The rhetorical and stylistic strategies of the Afrocentric orality, strategies of parody, satire, and masquerade and folklore interrogate the colonial and metropolitan power structures in *Wide Sargasso Sea* through "forms of verbal artistry such as calypso that require economy and highly developed verbal play [and] permit a depth of signification without many words" (Savory, 1998, p. 76). Annette Gilson (2004) writes that in the metropolis "she was subject to disparagement reserved by the English for West Indian colonials whose racial identity was suspect and whose social position was questionable at best" (p. 73). 'The Atlantic world' is a useful concept here, long a staple of slave-trade studies, recently given a cultural twist in Paul Gilroy's notion of a 'Black Atlantic', and already present in the deeply mediated title of Jean Rhys's novel, which names that which slows down the channels of communication which criss-cross the Atlantic: "I thought of 'Sargasso sea' or 'Wide Sargasso Sea' but nobody knew what I meant" (Rhys, 1969a, p. 154).

In the novel *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys links Anna's *unheimlichkeit* (unhomeliness) – the movement of the repressed from the unconscious into visibility and familiarity – with her longing for home. London extends however her alienation, and, as she haunts the imperial landscape, the text shows the imperial 'home' as the quintessential unhomely space. We see how her voyage is not a return home, but rather a journey on an uncertain course, a voyage into darkness and nothingness, leading nowhere. Elaine Savory (1998) notes that in Rhys's oeuvre, protagonists' responses to their physical surroundings become a "major way of communicating half-conscious judgements, emotional responses, [and] cultural identity" (p. 90). This is clearly illustrated in *Voyage in the Dark* as Anna's social alienation and psychic unhomeliness is exacerbated through the sameness and dullness of white English society, which, for her, resembles the architectural monotony of the city. London is a landscape devoid of alterity and change, a homogenous and inhospitable urban space: "you were perpetually moving to another place which was perpetually the same" (Rhys, 1969b, p. 8), she notes, while the houses are "all exactly alike" (Rhys, 1969b, p. 82) and "hideously stuck together" (Rhys, 1969b, p. 89).<sup>1</sup> Anna's Caribbean home stands in opposition to the stifling atmosphere in London. While England is for her a place out of which "the wilderness had gone" (Rhys, Rhys, 1969b, p. 78), the Caribbean is a colourful and heterogeneous natural space that signifies, for her, potential belonging and homeliness. Knowing everything about zombification (the process of animating corpse), Rhys also employs here the Black Caribbean symbols of the trickster and the zombie, two of the Afrocentric tropes. Rhys also highlights the category-defying properties of liminal spaces, when Rochester is reading about the practice of Obeah, a dark form of magic said to exist in the Caribbean.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna also recalls her train trip across England with Hester: watching the landscape outside through the window, Anna describes it as having a "small tidy look [...] everywhere fenced off from everywhere else" (Rhys, 1969b, p. 15).

#### 4. Conclusions

In highlighting the consubstantiality of space, location and cultural belonging, I started from the premise that Caribbean identities are shaped by embodied and embedded narratives, located in particular places. Thus, in Jean Rhys' novels, e.g. it is not spaces which ground identification, but places. A space becomes a place by being invested with meaning, a social signification that produces identity. In the case of the Caribbean, identity is relational with respect to a large community, which can locate the individual in its history and territory. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1991) reminds us that the nation "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (p. 164). In other words, the protagonist is the point of identification for the reader, who is through this process inserted in the imagined representation of the nation in Jean Rhys's novels. Another issue of the paper relies on the observation that while cultural hybridization highlights the individuals, the social contract contextualizes individuals as parts of the connected social units. In this respect, the book attempts to reveal the social contract (collusion) of racial stereotypes as a cultural and social fabrication. Inside this intertextual discourse, fascination with the 'spectacle' of the Other, of the image of the colonial Other becomes a trope of desire for the hybrid identities.

The rhetoric of hybridity associated with the Caribbean identity, and broadly speaking in particular with its "creolization" counterpart apply as compulsory a new framework that continues to mark Caribbean identity as an 'exotic' other.

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